

User Guide: Making Democracy Fun

Thinking about including Making Democracy Fun, or part of it, in a class? Or want to use it to design fun and engaging programs? You're in luck!

For Professors and Students

While all of the chapters weave together theory and practice, chapters 1, 2, and 8 engage more with theoretical debates; and chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus more on stories of programs on ground. When reading only one chapter, I recommend chapter 5, which best captures the core arguments of the book.

Several chapters are designed to be easily extracted as readings for undergraduate and graduate courses, on the following topics:

Democracy: Chapters 1, 2, 8

Social movements: Chapter 2

Public Policy: Chapters 3, 4, 5, 8

Latin American Studies: Chapters 4, 5

Urban Planning and Development: Chapters 5, 6

Research Methods & Program Evaluation: Chapter 7

Game Design: Chapters 3, 4, 5, 8

Youth Engagement: Chapter 4

For political scientists, I show how theories and practices of *game design* can amplify, popularize, and complicate efforts to deepen democracy, in both Latin American and North American contexts. I add to recent sociological work on affect, performance, and play by explaining how social movements have modeled and enacted new forms of democratic games. For geography and planning scholars interested in how ordinary people can imagine and re-imagine the places in which they live, my fieldwork in Argentina and Canada shows how games can structure and facilitate such bottom-up planning. For Latin Americanists, the two chapters on Argentina provide rare ethnographic accounts of the recent wave of participatory government programs. Finally, while scholars debate if and how game designers should blur the line between games and reality, I show how governments and community organizations have already delved into game design, and what these efforts reveal about the potential of games.

For Planners, Organizers, and Practitioners

Since the book demonstrates and explains over 30 concrete games and game design techniques, it can be a valuable guide for planners, organizers, and activists seeking to build effective democratic processes. Chapters 3 and 8 outline key game design tools for democratic participation, and Chapters 4, 5, and 6 bring them to life through real stories from the field.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter 1 – Should Democracy Be Fun?

I begin by arguing that fun and games are essential to the future of democracy. Despite its popularity, democracy is suffering from less engagement, less trust, and less power. While there are many reasons for these troubles, I focus on a root cause that has been neglected: *For most people, democratic participation is relatively unappealing*. It is boring, painful, and pointless. In a word, it is no fun. Unless democracy is made more enjoyable, it will struggle to attract more participation, trust, and power.

As I explain, fun is an exceptionally elusive concept, a broad proxy for diverse pleasures such as discovery, challenge, expression, and fantasy. These feelings are common in games, but by no means unique to them. For a graphic designer, tinkering with computer code to find the perfect shade of purple can be fun. For a community organizer, mobilizing neighbors to march in a protest can be fun. Nearly anything can be made fun – even democracy. In fact, games are ideal models for making democracy fun. Like democracy, games always involve participation and decision-making, by design. Unlike democracy, though, games are inspiring engagement, earning trust, and gaining power.

To illustrate how and why games can make democracy fun, I start with a tale of two meetings: a planning hearing in New York and a community assembly in Venezuela. To uncover why the hearing was disastrous and the assembly fun, I highlight the game mechanics at the heart of the latter and absent from the former. Drawing on survey data, I then illustrate how the problems of the hearing reflect broader discontent with democracy. After sorting through the usual culprits for this discontent, I explain how fun and games might make democracy more popular. I conclude, though, by warning about four dangers with using games for democratic participation: trivialization, manipulation, unfair outcomes, and no fun. Even with their benefits, are games worth the cost?

Chapter 2 – Games, Play & Democracy

To start elaborating how game design could best deepen democracy, in this chapter I lay out the various political roles of games and argue that governments and organizations should use games *in* and *as* political action. How we talk about and use games affects who participates in democratic politics, and how they participate. Wielding games as political metaphors and research methods (game theory) has done little to increase meaningful democratic participation. If democracy is to be more than a spectator sport, citizens need new ways to play the game. Serious video games and playful social movement tactics have helped engage people, though they usually remain sidelined from political decision-making. To make the most of games, I propose that governments and organizations directly integrate them into political campaigns, meetings, actions, and discussions.

I start the chapter by defining games - systems in which players engage in an *artificial conflict*, defined by *rules*, that results in *measurable outcomes*. I then trace how the media, politicians, and social movements use sports as political metaphors, and how political scientists use the

game-like models of ‘game theory’ to study decision-making. Next, I present the growing Games for Change movement, in which designers seek to educate and engage the public through (mostly) digital games about issues such as poverty (*Ayiti*), party politics (*Koalition*), and direct action (*A Force More Powerful*). I also review how politicians and activists have used play to engage citizens and influence decisions, from the carnivals of the Middle Ages to the radical cheerleaders and costumed superheroes of current movements. Finally, I discuss the political games emerging out of popular education, Theater of the Oppressed, and participatory planning movements, especially in Latin America.

Chapter 3 – What Game Design Can Teach Us about Democracy

Promising as these political games may be, the lessons of game design run much deeper. In Chapter Three, I describe how game designers craft fun games, and suggest how these design approaches could be applied to democratic political processes. I predict that game design could help address conflict, support deliberation, establish legitimate rules, link political inputs and outputs, and engage more – and more diverse – people. Unlike technocratic design approaches that transfer power from citizens to experts, game design provides people with greater skills and opportunities to participate meaningfully. But games and game mechanics might also exacerbate real-world conflicts, overwhelm people with rules, shift attention away from substantial issues, or trivialize serious political processes.

After introducing game design and game design theory, I present key game design concepts and 26 specific game mechanics that are most relevant for politics. To illustrate how game design concepts can apply beyond games, I then review how they are already contributing to the fields of education, business, and architecture. Finally, I propose how game mechanics might play out in public programs, and how they might affect democratic participation

Chapter 4 – Not Just Child’s Play: Games in Democratic Processes

The following four chapters test these possible effects through five examples of democratic processes that use games or game mechanics. Chapter Four focuses on games in Latin America, Five on game mechanics in Latin America, Six on game mechanics in North America, and Seven on games in North America. I start by illustrating how Latin American governments and organizations include games in participatory initiatives. Through case studies of two programs in Rosario, I show how such games can enhance – or undermine – participation. In the City of the Children program, Children’s Councils draft policy proposals largely by playing games. Youth also participate in urban design workshops, however, in which abstract and isolated games marginalize their participation. As a separate initiative, the Department of Children runs Theater of the Oppressed workshops, in which adult youth workers devise strategies for implementing a national Children’s Law. The workshops’ theater games show how bodily movement can spark productive dialogue, but also how facilitators’ power is difficult to wield and easy to abuse.

The chapter is structured around stories of four meetings. In each case, I revisit the games used and assess their impacts on participation. For example, two stories focus on the games of *forum theater* that youth workers played at each Theater of the Oppressed workshop. One team acted

out a scenario of adults violating the Children’s Law, then challenged the other team to model a way of overcoming this injustice and applying the law.

Chapter 5 – Rosario Hábitat: Designing Participation *like* a Game

In Chapter Five I illustrate how governments and organizations can incorporate *game mechanics* into participatory processes. Even when games themselves are not appropriate, designers can use game mechanics to make participation more *like a game*. Through the case of the participatory development program Rosario Hábitat, I explore which game mechanics contribute the most to democratic participation. I show that when facilitators use particular mechanics that engage the senses, establish legitimate rules, generate ‘collaborative competition,’ and link participation with outcomes, they build more democratic community agreements. When they do not take this approach, the participatory process often collapses. I support these arguments through stories of four community workshops, interspersed with interview quotes and reflections.

Chapter 6 – Toronto Community Housing: Game Design in Less Fertile Soils

Chapter Six demonstrates that game mechanics can enhance democratic participation outside of Latin America. Governments in the Global North face additional obstacles to designing participation like a game: less supportive context, less playful citizens, and less precedent for games. All three obstacles are very present in Toronto. Yet since 2001, the city’s housing authority has used game mechanics to engage tenants in “participatory budgeting.” Each year, the housing authority invites tenants to decide how to spend \$9 million, through “Allocation Days” that resemble a game show. Similarly to Rosario Hábitat, TCH designs participation like a game. And like in Rosario, I found that this approach made participation more enjoyable and effective. In other words, game techniques can enhance democracy not only in Latin America, but also in North America.

In 2009, however, the housing authority replicated Allocation Days more widely across the city, creating new opportunities and challenges. The new process boosted participation, tenant power, and staff buy-in. But it also led to less prepared staff, less clear rules, and less healthy competition. These shortcomings enabled staff and tenants to manipulate the process. They sometimes led to unfair outcomes. And they made the process less fun. Could game design fix these problems?

Chapter 7 – My Game Design Experiment

In Chapter Seven, I recount my attempt to apply the lessons of the book, through a new program aimed at addressing the problems with participatory budgeting in Toronto. Over two years, I led a participatory evaluation at TCH, in which I worked with a team of tenants to evaluate and improve participatory budgeting. We studied game design, and tried to instill game mechanics in the PB process. I also practiced the change we were seeking, by designing the evaluation meetings around games and game mechanics. The participatory evaluation offers two main lessons. First, it shows how games – not just game mechanics – can work in democratic processes in the Global North. Second, we modeled how to redesign a democratic

process to make it work more like a game – and showed that such a redesign improves the quality of participation.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion: A Toolbox for Fixing Democracy

In the conclusion, I draw on the lessons of game design theory and the case studies to propose how governments and organizations can and should use games to engage people. First, I present the types of games and game mechanics that I found particularly useful, and offer examples from my research. I then review the effects that these games and game mechanics may have on democratic participation, and suggest strategies for fulfilling the potential of games.

I conclude by suggesting that we rethink democracy and games. I argue that governments and organizations should make democratic participation more fun, to increase citizen engagement and trust in democracy, and to empower people to democratically decide more issues that affect their lives. To accomplish this, we should directly – and carefully – include games and game mechanics in democratic processes, not only through digital technologies but also in face-to-face interactions.